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ABSTRACT

This paper, written from the perspective of a classroom teacher who is also the child of immigrant parents, examines issues related to teaching reading to low-literate minority students for whom English is not their first language. The paper presents background issues, examines the process of language acquisition, and focuses on the following: the political context (this country is in the middle of a controversy over bilingual issues, with several states arguing over how to teach new immigrants and various federal mandates about bilingual education); educational factors that affect the process of gaining English proficiency (teacher effectiveness and student motivation); cultural factors that influence immigrants' adjustment to U.S. education (including language); key principles of second language acquisition (e.g., literacy in the first language); age and second language acquisition; language and meaning (the importance of cultural relevance); and instructional strategies (environment, meaning and the language experience approach, content-centered approach, and cooperative learning). (Contains 93 references.) (SM)

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ED 462 014

TEACHING READING TO LOW-LITERATE LANGUAGE MINORITY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

by

THOMAS THOMAS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN TEACHING READING AND LANGUAGE ARTS

1999

Oakland University
Rochester, Michigan

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Clemantin,

for all the love and support she has given me,

now, and for the last twenty years.

All this time, she has been my love and my life.

And to my children Daniel, Theresa, and Lauren,

who by motivating me to finish this work,

have allowed me to be a role model to them,

hopefully, inspiring them to start their own works.

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To **my bilingual students and their parents**, for trusting me with the privilege of entering their lives, and for allowing me to learn from them by helping me to be engaged in questions about language and literacy.

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To **Dr. W. Dorsey Hammond**, for just being Dorsey, and for demonstrating that the value of higher education comes in providing down-to-earth answers for the everyday questions that emerge from real students in real classrooms.

To my **family**, for being everything that really matters to me.

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There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in a community by virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common.
. . . Consensus demands communication.

- John Dewey (1916, p.5)

No man is an island entire of itself.

- John Donne (1624)

Introduction

Both the poet and the philosopher, writing 300 years apart, recognized that it is only in relationship that humankind finds itself. To be fulfilled, people need to belong and they need to be in communication. To lack human interaction, can throw someone to despair. To have it, can lead them as far as euphoria or ecstasy.

The modern American media portrays both possibilities so powerfully and so graphically. In the 1968 movie, "The Heart is a Lonely Hunter", the lead character is deaf and is overwhelmed by his feeling of loneliness and sense of apartness, which is caused by his deafness. He commits suicide. In 1962, the real life story of Helen Keller and her teacher, Anne Sullivan, is enacted in "The Miracle Worker". This motion picture dramatizes how the deep need and persistent effort of two people to communicate resulted in their jubilant victory over silence and blindness.

Communication is the stuff of human life. Sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and biologists, as well as the poet and the philosopher, are forever considering the why's, the what's, and the wherefore's of it. Studies of communications between people can be formal, abstract, and statistical. They can

also be informal, naturalistic, and common-sensical (Montagu & Matson, 1979). Millions of volumes, all from multiple points of view and with so many different approaches, are written about this process, this so vital and most basic of human phenomenons called communication.

What I hope is a meaningful contribution to the subject, is a paper written from the perspective of a classroom teacher. Being involved in communication issues is a part of my daily routine. I work with a minority community of high school students that is in a constant struggle to find a way off the island of apartness and isolation, where circumstances have placed them, and on to an opening towards a common ground with the seemingly separate to them, majority, that is similar in respect to their being part of a community of learners, but is so different in one major respect.

What is the barrier to commonality and community? Who are these young people that can feel so apart? What are the circumstances that have placed them on an island of isolation? What can make them feel so different? The students I teach are the sons and daughters of the "huddled masses" that Lady Liberty beckoned to this land of opportunity and freedom. These young people are newcomers to the United States. The barrier to communication they face is a new world that does not speak the language or languages that they speak. Their backgrounds are varied, but they are all different from the mainstream society because they all have the same common need: to learn English.

As obvious as it may seem, it is language that is the key to communication. In the U.S., it is what immigrant newcomers need to gain entry into the institutions of

American society. In the everyday enterprises of everyday people, the normal exchanges of information and thoughts are accomplished through language.

Language, a complex configuration of abilities required for the communication activities of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Hakuta & Snow, 1986), is what human beings do most. The New York State Department of Education offers the statistic that 70 percent of a person's waking time is spent in these four communication activities. Of that 70 percent, the average literate person spends 45 percent of this time listening, 30 percent speaking, 16 percent reading, and 9 percent writing. Naturally, these percentages vary depending on the person, but unless we are eating or sleeping, we are probably engaged in some form of verbal communication (Colvin, 1997).

What should also be obvious is the inherent danger to American society-at-large if a segment of that society, no matter what its size or origin, cannot participate by virtue of not being able to communicate. A functioning democracy operates through consensus. And again, to quote John Dewey (1916), "Consensus demands communication" (p.5). Language binds us together, and language can keep us apart. If we were born in the U.S., it is easy to take for granted the symbols and sounds that we so casually arrange in our speaking or writing, and that direct our lives and connect us together (Kessler & McDonald, 1988).

In this paper, I do not presume to be as profound as the philosopher or as moving as the poet. What I hope to do is convey the insights I have gained and the views I have formulated because of the many experiences I have had as a classroom teacher, and in other roles I have assumed in my life. Who I am, and who I have been, is, (1) a teacher of students for whom English is not their first

language; (2) a parent of children who keep me grounded in the world of young people, whatever language they primarily use to communicate; (3) a graduate student, who considers himself a part of a learning community that has opened for me a door to academic pursuits, which in turn have given me a pleasurable taste of, and a deep appreciation for, the language arts and learning; and (4), the son of immigrant parents who raised me to be bilingual and to live biculturally.

The process of gathering research and of putting my thoughts together to produce a quality thesis, is as much a look at, as it is a search for, answers to questions about the aspect of communication I deal with daily in the classroom, namely, the acquisition of English as a second language, or what is commonly referred to as ESL. More specifically, I will focus in this work, on the language minority high school age students, who because of various destabilizing circumstances that have disrupted their educational development, enter U.S. schools with little exposure to general literacy. My ultimate goal, then, is to examine and to draw conclusions about the best way to promote, encourage, and teach English reading literacy to minority language learners in high school that are low-literate in their native tongues.

Fundamental and Foundational Background Issues

At this point, I believe it is important to stop and consider some issues that are unique to second language learning, as well as others that apply to all of education, in general. These need to be dealt with before I develop my thesis. These comments will serve as "givens" or foundational elements, that will explain some of the assumptions or comments I make.

While there is a tremendous volume of literature on second language acquisition (SLA) research and practices, until the early 1990's, the needs of the older ESL student who is low-literate in his or her native language, has hardly been recognized, nor has been very much written about (Hamayan, 1994). Prior to the late 1970's, instructional methods and materials for the post-elementary school student learning English as a second language, assumed the presence of literacy in a first language (Wrigley & Guth, 1992). After 1975, the United States experienced an influx of refugees from Southeast Asia. Many had minimal or no experience in reading and writing in their native languages. As these struggling newcomers entered established bilingual programs, educators saw that existing methods and materials were not appropriate for them (Holt, 1995).

As a professional discipline, SLA is a young endeavor. While language and communication have been topics long studied, it is only since 1960 that second language acquisition, specifically, has gained the attention of the researcher (Long, 1990). Most of the publications I have examined in doing my research, and most of the bibliographies included in this field, have been written since 1980. What is significant is that the majority of researchers in SLA have shown that the most effective way for *bilingual* students (the term most commonly used to describe non-English speaking learners) to develop both academic concepts and English language proficiency is through their first language (Freeman & Freeman, 1994b). In other words, the best way to learn a second language (L2) is on the strength of the first or native language (L1).

I conceived the idea of doing a thesis to find ways to reach the students with whom I felt most ineffective. It has been relatively easy to work with the already

fluent reading and writing second language learner. My greatest concern is for the low-literate high school age newcomer, the so-called at-risk ESL student, who seems to be falling between the proverbial cracks in the educational process. They are at a frustration level, and so many are either acting out their displeasure with their progress and becoming discipline problems, and thereby dropping out of school, or they sit silently, nodding their heads, seemingly semi-oblivious of their purpose in the scholastic arena of their lives. Some make progress, but I would like to think that there is room for more progress for more students.

When I related my experience of there being limited research on and programs for the low-literate high school student to reading professor W. Dorsey Hammond, during a class he was directing and I was attending at Oakland University during the fall of 1997, he responded by saying that he was not surprised. He explained that most remedial reading programs are intended for the K-2 child, and that in general, there was little work being done for upper elementary and middle school students in mainstream education, let alone for the literacy-disadvantaged bilingual high schooler. Professor Hammond recognizes the need to help the older student to read, and is currently involved in a project addressing this need.

Faced with research I was finding, and considering what my professor has observed, I initially saw my students' L1 low-literacy as an insurmountable obstacle to their being able to acquire proficiency in their L2 English. I reasoned that if literacy skills in the L1 were necessary for progress in acquiring the L2, and my students' overall literacy skills were weak, how would they be able to learn, and how could they be taught effectively? This is the dilemma I have been facing.

Fortunately, this has been a false dilemma, one contrived because of my limited understanding of the research.

In my search to be a more effective ESL/bilingual teacher, I have known that there had to be answers that made sense to me and that I could apply to my teaching methodology. I once heard it said that the greatest proof that something exists, is that there is a need for it. For the students I am teaching, their need to enter the mainstream is one that cannot de denied. There *are* answers; they are simply waiting to be found.

My inquiry has led to an organization, Literacy Volunteers of America, Inc. (LVA), whose main focus is education for adults. Founded in 1962, by Ruth Colvin, LVA "grew out of a concern for the millions of people in the United States who cannot read and write or whose reading and writing are so inadequate that their limited literacy is a problem in their everyday lives" (Cheatham, Colvin, & Laminach, 1993, p.1). These people that Mrs. Colvin describes and expresses her concerns about, are the same people I see in my classes.

The question most difficult to find an answer to is where to start. As a teacher, where was I to begin? How would I initially reach the older student for whom literacy has played a minimal role in their lives? In contrast to a 5 or 6 year old child, who is at an early stage of cognitive development, and who can be receptive to new ways of interacting with a new environment, Hamayan (1994) says that the older elementary, middle school, and especially high school age student, who has set ways of dealing with his or her surroundings and circumstances, may not be open to replacing nonliteracy-based systems with those appropriate for the effective development of literacy.

My breakthrough in understanding the key to reaching and helping the low-literate individuals in my charge, came in my reading of Colvin's I Speak English (1997), a publication she wrote as a guide to teaching English to speakers of other languages. What she believes, complements current research on second language development. (For all that it is worth, I find it interesting that while Colvin and LVA often cite and recommend for reading, the authors of current SLA research, I have failed to find reciprocal acknowledgments by the bilingual establishment.)

Colvin (1997) explains, that while still very young, people internalize the systems of their native languages (the forms and arrangements of words, sounds, and meanings and the basic patterns or structures). While not all people read or write in their own language, virtually everyone is able to perform two language skills in their native language, namely, listening and speaking. After all, being *low*-literate does not mean being totally *il*-literate. And neither does it imply lack of cognitive ability.

The key to reaching the low-literate student is to build on their strengths, their native oral language proficiency. Colvin (1997) says to "consider the spoken language as the primary language system and the written as the secondary system" (p.11). Supporting and adding to this, Lapp and Flood (1983) assert that "oral language is the base of the reading process" (p.442), and if it is not encouraged and developed, reading may end up seeming like a "senseless, futile exercise" (p.442) for the student. Since oral language is what they know, it is essential to build on that. Reading and writing skills will develop concomitantly as basic oral patterns are mastered and expanded (Colvin, 1997).

From Colvin and LVA, I have come to understand that reading and writing literacy in the L1 is not essential to gaining overall literacy in the L2. What is important when considering the issue of literacy, is that research evidence is clear that basic literacy skills, even when oral only, which are developed in the L1, can and do transfer to L2 (Roberts, 1994).

This literacy transfer will not occur spontaneously. The statistics bare that out. "In study after study, a non-English-language background has been correlated with higher rates of falling behind, failing, and dropping out" (Crawford, 1995, p.15). A 1988 report by the Intercultural Development Research Association cited by Crawford (1995), reveals that language-minority youths are 1.5 times more likely than their English language counterparts to have discontinued school before completing twelve years. In a nation where 32 million people (over the age of five) speak a language other than English at home (Wiley, 1994), 14 million speak English poorly or not at all (LVA, 1997).

Again, the question begs to be asked: Where does one begin? The first thing the research on language acquisition teaches about language learning, is that whether it is a first or second language, "people learn language because they are in real situations communicating about important and interesting things" (McKeon, 1994, p.16). It is not enough to be in an educational facility. For literacy to transfer, students must be engaged in an educational process in which language learning is integrated with "meaningful content and purposive communication" (Genesee, 1994, p.9).

How is this done? Students, on their own, cannot do it. But they will respond to a teacher who facilitates and promotes admission to what Frank Smith (1988)

calls "the Literacy Club". Students learn, he says, by participating in literate activities with people who know how and why to do these things. They become part of the club, because the teacher builds a classroom that is full of meaningful and useful reading and writing activities, where both participation and collaboration are always the norm (Smith, 1988). (Further on in this paper, I will discuss specific strategies and practices that will facilitate learning and the transfer of literacy.)

Just as aspiring athletes and artists are attracted to a soccer team or a dance troupe, immigrant newcomers, who are aspiring language learners, can be moved to join an English-speakers club. Whether an activity involves training the body or mastering the mind, the doer is drawn to it because he or she derives personal satisfaction from it. Whatever the club, it is entered freely, and in the process of joining and participating, learning takes place.

In commenting about Smith's ideas, Freeman and Freeman (1994a), note that "teachers and students form clubs as they pose and answer questions about topics of interest. Language learners in these classrooms use their new language as they engage in meaningful inquiry" (p.52).

This circumstance of students engaged in meaningful inquiry, because of their joining and participating in clubs, brings to my mind something I once heard and subscribe to, and that is that "we are only alive when we are in relationship". A character in Ayn Rand's The Fountainhead (1968) says as much: "There's nothing as important on earth, except human beings. There's nothing as important about human beings as their relations to one another" (p. 270).

This "importance of human beings", while it may be relegated to the area of personal beliefs, is also a sound educational principle, and one explored and

discussed by Russian psychologist and scholar Lev Vygotsky (1978). Though his theories on human cognitive development were formulated in the early 1900's, his ideas have only recently been appreciated and promoted by North American scholars (Meyers, 1993). Vygotsky developed a concept, significant in the same way that the participation and collaboration of the Literacy Club are to Smith (1988), which he called *the zone of proximal development* (ZPD). In his own words,

> It is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

My understanding of what Vygotsky says is that students learn best when new information presented, is just beyond the reach of their present knowledge. If we can come to some measure of a person's learning level, whatever that level is, it can probably be increased by interaction and collaboration with a classmate or a more knowledgeable person. Under the guidance of an effective teacher, when one student interacts with another, that other's actual development level can increase.

Contact between people in the educational context results in the increased stimulation of ideas. In scientific terms, it is like symbiosis, in which two organisms can do together for each one's own benefit, which neither could do alone. By reacting and interacting, a person gets an idea he or she might never have arrived at alone. By being with each other and interacting in the ZPD, people disturb their comfort zone and stretch themselves to achieve what they might not do otherwise. What is exciting to consider, is that the process can also have the same positive effect on the teacher.

In terms of second language teaching, the views of Vygotsky are particularly pertinent because what is being proposed is "an explicit and fundamental

relationship between social interactions and language and the development of students' potential for thought and higher level thinking processes, i.e., learning and intelligence" (Meyers, 1993, p. 30).

When I consider Smith's metaphor of the Literacy Club or Vygotsky's ZPD , I am reminded of William Glasser's (1990) concept of a "Quality School". Glasser, like Smith and Vygotsky, recognizes the role of the teacher. He is critical of the National Commission on Excellence in Education report, A Nation at Risk (1983), because in its recommendations, there is no consideration of the relationship between teachers and their students. The 1983 report calls for a longer school day and year, stiffer graduation requirements, and more homework. He points out that the report fails to address, that these, what he calls, "coercive practices" with the same teachers for whom the students were not doing quality work, would have no effect on school improvement or student academic progress.

Glasser likens non-quality schools to factories with repressive atmospheres caused by coercive bosses. Production is minimal. In the quality school that he strives for, teachers, in cooperation with administrators, would be guiding leaders who professionally managed their students. He offers these statements to make the point that non-desirable, non-quality schools are taught by bosses, and that desirable, quality schools are taught by leaders:

> A boss drives. A leader leads.
> A boss relies on authority. A leader relies on cooperation.
> A boss says "I". A leader says "We".
> A boss creates fear. A leader creates confidence.
> A boss knows how. A leader shows how.
> A boss creates resentment. A leader breeds enthusiasm.
> A boss fixes blame. A leader fixes mistakes.
> A boss makes work drudgery. A leader makes work interesting (Glasser, 1990, p. xi).

Approaches that support the ideas and philosophies in Smith's Literacy Club and Glasser's Quality Schools, as well as the ZPD of Vygotsky, make so much sense. They represent principles that apply to all learning and to all students. They advocate and invite settings where young people can receive the encouragement, support, and response that creates high expectations for the progress and success necessary in the achievement of second language learning (Weaver, 1994).

As common-sensical as these approaches and views are, one is left to wonder why, considering how dismal the statistics are, generally speaking, in regards to the high dropout rate for bilingual learners, they seem not to have been successfully carried over into bilingual programs and classrooms. Are the concepts of the Literacy Club, the Quality School, and the ZPD unworkable or inapplicable in the ESL environment? Are they an ideal, like "limits" in Calculus, which may be approached but never attained?

Looking at the whole picture of bilingual education, I think it can be said that ideas like those promoted by Smith, Vygotsky, and Glasser, coupled with what Cloud (1994) refers to as "the current best practices" (p.245) used in ESL classrooms (which will be explained further on in this paper) are actually working. The high dropout rates of second language learners are not due to faulty practices, but rather can be attributed to what can be called "background factors" (Krashen, 1998, p.11). In an article, written about the high dropout rate for Hispanic students in California, Stephen Krashen (1998) refutes the conventional wisdom of critics who blame bilingual education for the failure of this population. Citing a study by Curiel, Rosenthal, and Richek (1986), Krashen shows evidence that bilingual education is not only blameless, but actually results in lower dropout rates. Comparing dropout

rates for 86 students between grades 7 and 11 with one or more years in bilingual education with a similar group of 90, it was found that those in a program were significantly less likely to dropout at a rate of 23.5% versus 43%.

Assuming that a lack of literacy can be overcome and that current bilingual programs can create the proper framework for academic success, the question of what stands in the way of learning and literacy has to be asked? What is there that contributes to the dropout rate of secondary ESL students? The "background factors" that Krashen identifies as the instruments of failure are: low English language ability, poverty, length of residence in the U.S., the print environment, and family conditions (1998).

Many of these problems have academic antidotes and instructional cures, but before these can be considered, there is another essential issue that must be examined, namely the reason people do things in the first place.

I think, ultimately, that the issue of learning and literacy, in all, but especially secondary classrooms, comes down to motivation and enthusiasm. Teaching demands enthusiasm and excitement; learning requires motivation and desire. Whatever programs schools implement or whatever strategies teachers employ, without the right attitude on the part of both students and teachers, whether bilingual or mainstream, academic achievement will always remain allusive.

I recall a series of articles published in NEA Today, the professional teacher magazine of the National Education Association, that highlighted various educational innovations being implemented or attempted throughout the country. Articles in various issues dealt with topics like block scheduling, students portfolios, outcome based education, and programmed computer instruction. While the articles had

made their points, it was a letter to the editor that caught my attention, and made what I thought were, the most astute observations. I recall the author, who was a teacher with about 25 years of experience, reflecting that he or she had seen many educational fads come and go. Administrators and program innovators would tout their grand ideas and extol their apparent successes after their implementation, but within two or three years, these "final words" in educational trends would end up being tossed on a heap of other discarded teaching innovations. What brought the short-lived victories, said the letter-writer, was not the program themselves, but the initial excitement and the intense enthusiasm shown when they were first introduced. As the teacher's fervor decreased, so did the effectiveness of the program being taught. Supporting this observation, and referring specifically to teachers working with second language learners, Frank May (1994) offers the idea that "an attitude of excitement about the opportunity to work with people with different language backgrounds is the most important ingredient of instructional success" (p.479).

Mike Rose (1989), in his autobiographical Lives on the Boundary, reflects on his gradual realization of what it took to make learning possible:

> Teaching, I was coming to understand, was a kind of romance. You didn't just work with words or a chronicle of dates or facts about the suspension of protein in milk. You wooed kids with these things, invited a relationship of sorts, the terms of connection being the narrative, the historical event, the balance of casein and water. Maybe nothing was "intrinsically interesting." Knowledge gained its meaning, at least initially, through a touch on the shoulder, through a conversation ... with a teacher. My first enthusiasm about writing came because I wanted a teacher to like me (p.102).

What Mr. Rose came to understand, I believe, was that it is not the particular lesson that matters, necessarily. It is the relationship between a teacher and a student that opens the door to learning and literacy.

Assuming the presence of a teacher's enthusiasm, what mostly matters and what effects learning profoundly is the student's own reasons for learning. The teacher is a powerful catalyst, but it is the student that makes the ultimate choices about his or her own life. William Glasser (1998) says that people do what they do for only one reason: They want to. In second language learning, according to William Littlefield (1984), an SLA researcher, motivation is the "crucial force which determines whether a learner embarks on a task at all, how much energy he devotes to it, and how long he perseveres" (p.53).

In my own teaching situation, my colleagues and I often discuss the best way to reach particularly, what we experience as the unwilling or at-risk student. Invariably, the conclusion reached at the end of a conversation is that, these "problem" children will eventually, or at least hopefully, "grow up". Whether these students are "acting out" or "dropping out", the successful process of reaching out to them must include their own positive responsiveness.

I have heard it said that "we are not their last hope". I have to agree – reluctantly, of course. As a teacher, I feel responsible, to make every effort I can, to reach my students. But I also realize that certain values and behaviors cannot be super-imposed. Part of their education is learning that what they accomplish, or do not accomplish, is a direct result of decisions only they can make. While, according to the U.S. Department of Education (1986), "students tend to learn as little or as much as their teachers expect" (p.7), it is also true, as Harry Wong (1991), noted educator, author, and speaker, in addressing new teachers, points out that it is the person who works the most that learns the most.

As stated earlier, my ultimate goal for this paper is to examine and draw conclusions about the best way to promote, encourage, and teach English reading literacy to minority language learners in high school that are low-literate in their native tongues. One thing, among many, that both my personal experience and this academic inquiry makes clear to me, is that the process of acquiring an education abounds with a multitude of questions for which there are no simple or all-inclusive answers. While "there seems to be a strong inclination in education to try to find a single style and set of materials that will address the needs of all children" (Farnum, Flood, & Lapp, 1994, p.139), the reality is that there is no one way for all students to learn.

Examining the Process of Language Acquisition

John Dewey (1938) reflects that "Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites, formulating its beliefs in terms of Either-Ors" (p.17). In an ideal world, either-or postulations may be possible; theoreticians can indulge themselves with how existence should conform to their visions. Ultimately, reality must prevail and, according to Dewey (1938) "circumstances must compel us to compromise" (p.17).

This is not a perfect world. And while there are answers, in the best of situations, the question of how to learn to communicate in a language other than one's own, must be dealt with in terms of the many kinds of circumstances that learners find themselves. Under optimal conditions, acquiring oral proficiency can be a two year process. To be able to match the language skills of a native English speaker who communicates effectively in the reading and writing used in academic subjects and textbooks, can require a newcomer to the U.S. anywhere from four to nine years of English language study and practice (Collier, 1987; Cummins, 1989).

In this not-so-perfect world, where people are displaced and educations are disrupted, this process can take even longer.

Historical Background

Though language learning can be a difficult and time-consuming endeavor, it is not an uncommon or unprecedented one. While my focus and purpose here is to search out answers to educational questions, the wider picture of teaching English to speakers of languages other than English, would not be complete without a look at the history and politics that frames it.

So much of American history is a story of individuals and peoples, who have immigrated to this land. So many left their homelands searching for a better life, bringing with them their private hopes and personal dreams, importing their unique customs and cultures. This was the case for my own father who arrived in America from his native Mesopotamia in 1928 aboard the HMS Queen Mary. And it was the same scenario for my brother-in-law, who in 1993, landed at LaGuardia Airport in New York City as a refugee via Jordan and Austria, from his war-torn Iraqi homeland. In the 65 years between the entry of both these people in my life, many, many other of my relatives have made America their home. Regardless of who the immigrants were or what their country of origin was, no matter what era they lived in or how many there were, whatever place they settled in or for whatever reason they came, the challenge of taking on a new and uncertain environment is drastically compounded for the non-English speaker.

At the time of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, 20% of the immigrant population was from non-English speaking countries – France, Spain, Germany, Holland, or Denmark. These settlers were faced with conforming to the

linguistic majority who migrated from English-speaking Great Britain (Bouvier, 1988). In recent times, especially since 1980, immigrants have come from 194 nations (Allen, 1985), and of those, 85% are from non-English speaking Third World areas of Asia and Latin America (Crawford, 1995).

The percentage of non-English speaking newcomers has increased over the years. If it was important in the past that recent arrivees learned to understand English, and to be understood in English, it is certainly just as imperative now, or because of technological advances, even more so, for their successful settling in the U.S. to be proficient English listeners, speakers, writers, and readers.

The America my father and his generation came to, is a completely different world than the one that has greeted my brother-in-law and his contemporaries. With no more than a third or fourth grade education, and the oral English he picked up as he needed, my father was able to establish a business and make a living that gave him and the family he started, a comfortable, fulfilling life. My brother-in-law, on the other hand, even with a post-high school diploma in electrical education from his native country, has had great difficulty, because of limited English, gaining access to even low-level entry employment.

This is no longer the world of my father. It is obvious to me that quality education which results in English language proficiency, is the key to a successful entry into today's American society. I know my brother-in-law would concur with me. That being said, what is not obvious, based on the political battle being fought over bilingual education, is what is the *best way* to provide the greatest opportunity for non-English speakers to acquire mastery of the English language.

An important, but often overlooked lesson of history, is that it is continuously repeating itself. Issues appear and disappear, and then appear again. How to best serve English language learners has been at the center of an "either-or" pedagogical and political debate (a-la-Dewey) that has been ongoing for the last thirty years, but has also existed since the founding of this country. Compromise, then and now, is not a solution that has been easily arrived at.

Language and learning are topics of concern that go back to even before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Writing in 1751, Benjamin Franklin complained to a friend that Pennsylvania would "in a few years become a German Colony: nstead of their learning our language, we must learn theirs, or live as in a foreign country" (Labaree, 1959, p.120). It is interesting, that another Pennsylvanian, Benjamin Rush, nearly 20 years later, recommended a program of instruction similar to what today would be referred to as "bilingual education", that would "teach English through German" (Baron, 1990, p.68).

There were many programs to teach English in early America. Colonial schools operated in Dutch, French, Swedish, and German. In 1839, Ohio became the first state to adopt a bilingual education laws authorizing German-American instruction. Louisiana did the same for French and English in 1847, just as New Mexico Territory instituted a program in Spanish and English in 1850. By 1900, nearly a dozen states had passed similar legislation (Crawford, 1995).

History is often a record of extremes. Franklin's fears gave way to sensible solutions, which in turn, succumbed to fear again. While World War I (WWI) drew blood in Europe, it also took its toll of victims here in America, in the form of mistrust and prejudice. Then former President Theodore Roosevelt in 1918 supported a

measure that called for extending the period before naturalization to as much as twenty-one years, and for deporting immigrants who had not learned English after five years (Baron, 1990). In the negative spirit of that time, 167 years after Franklin wrote his friend and made his fears known, a law in the state of Pennsylvania banned German from all of its schools (Baron, 1990).

Political Context

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Now, 80 years after WWI, Americans are again in the middle of another bilingual issues controversy. On June 2, 1998, 61% of California voters passed Proposition 227, an initiative of Silicon Valley resident, Ron Unz. The measure basically mandates the end of bilingual education in California, where 40% of the country's bilingual population lives. In the least, it radically alters its nature, by replacing a wide variety of bilingual education programs with one uniform approach, and by requiring that students with "limited English proficiency" be limited to one year in a "sheltered English" classroom, after which they would be placed in "regular" classrooms (Castro, 1998).

California is just one of many states now embroiled in an argument over how to teach new immigrants. Again, the pendulum has swung away from openness and common sense to reactionism and monolithic thinking. Thirty years ago, people's perceptions were different than now. "The 1960s marked the beginning of a period of serious discussion and debate concerning the lack of academic success of minority group students" (Genesee, 1987a, p.133). Liberal immigration laws of that decade opened this country to such an unprecedented flow of immigrant settlers that many of the schools were consequently overwhelmed by a large and diverse influx of non-English speakers (Crawford, 1997). Such demographic changes resulted in

the raising of concerns about "the nation's official language policy, the delivery of public education to linguistic-minority children, and the English-speaking majority's attitudes towards bilingualism and bilinguals" (Genesee, 1987b).

The eventual result was the passing of the Bilingual Education Act by Congress, and the January 2, 1968 signing of it, by President Lyndon Johnson. That law and the subsequent Education Amendment Act of 1974 defined bilingual education in the United States as "instruction that includes English, plus another language" (Lang, 1995, p. 63). The congressional laws became an admission that past instructional practices emphasizing English-only instruction were not working for children who came to school speaking other languages. Born of necessity, the new legislative acts became mandates to find a better way to teach and learn English that included, rather than excluded, the use of a student's native language (Crawford, 1997).

Regardless of the federal mandates, the political debate continues, and tends to dominate and cloud the educational issues. Right now, it seems to me that there is a prevailing conventional wisdom that is seeking "cheaper and faster" rather than "effective and long-lasting", teaching methodologies. I sense that politicians, employing either-or rhetoric, are listening to and encouraging voices of fear and frustration, that say that focusing on immigration issues, takes limited resources away from the needs of mainstream American citizens.

Writing for the online publication, Teacher Magazine, Lynn Schnaiberg (1997, March 5) quotes Arthur Levine, president of Teachers College, Columbia University, on the problem of the politicization of education. "The educational agenda" says Levine, "is taking a backseat to the political agenda. We're fighting an

ideological war, and the school is becoming the vehicle through which we decide on the resolution of social or political differences."

While in general, debate on a subject tends to be positive and light shedding, in this instance, the results have been quite deleterious. What exists in the arena of bilingual education is a battle that has discouraged quality research on language acquisition, and according to reporter Schnaiberg (1997), has "flooded the field with questionable studies, and weakened the credibility of the legitimate research that is produced."

The National Research Council (NRC), the research arm of the Washington-based National Academy of Sciences, supports Schnaiberg's claim in a telling report on bilingual education, entitled Improving Schooling for Language Minority Children (August & Hakuta, 1997). The panel of researchers and educators assert that "too much research has been used to try to prove whether an English-only or bilingual approach works best with limited-English-proficient students" (Schnaiberg, 1997, January 22). Kenji Hakuta, an education professor at Stanford University and the chairman of the NRC committee that drafted the 483-page report, observes that in recent years, "studies quickly have become politicized by advocacy groups selectively promoting research finds to support their positions" (Schnaiberg, 1997, January 22). The result, says Hakuta, is that "important areas are ignored, such as how to enable these students to meet rigorous academic standards" (Schnaiberg, 1997, January 22).

So, where lies the answer? What is the way out of the quagmire of senseless distortions and needless exaggerations? What is the solution that can preserve the credible findings of legitimate research and still encourage a creative

search for that "best way" to teach and learn English? Is there a way to compromise on issues as advocated by Dewey without compromising the truth? I say: yes.

Hakuta (Schnaiberg, 1997, March 5), as well as researcher Richard C. Seder (1998), the education studies director of the Reason Public Policy Institute (RPPI) and author of an institute report on bilingual education, both suggest that focusing on what specific practices are successful is much more fruitful than dwelling on whether one general approach is better than another.

What Hakuta and Seder advocate, complements a view held by P. David Pearson of Michigan State University. While not specifically addressing the SLA topic, his words on the bilingual-related issue of early literacy are so pertinent to it. Pearson advises that educators embrace a "reasoned stance" and avoid being "continuously swept from one extreme to another by the educational pendulum" and become part of what he calls the "radical middle" (Birdyshaw & Potter, 1997).

Using words that apply particularly well to the politically charged arena of bilingual education, Dr. Pearson warns:

> If we want to preserve our current system of public education, if we want to build upon the knowledge about the teaching and learning of literacy that we have acquired in the past twenty years to create even richer learning opportunities for our children, we must find a common ground on which to stand while facing our critics and addressing their concerns (Birdyshaw, & Potter, 1997, p.11).

Embracing the "radical middle" and avoiding "either-or rhetoric" does not mean *not* taking a position, nor that there are no "right ways" or "wrong ways" to educate. It does mean taking an honest and objective look at the valid research based on verifiable facts. It means being willing to let go of personal pet notions and

being able to accept that success in second language learning is occurring currently in a variety of places using a variety of methods.

Educational Factors

What is known for sure is that methodology alone is not the key determiner of academic success or failure for the non-English speaking newcomer. Seder (1998) asserts that variations in the effectiveness of different programs is dependent on factors unique to the students, such as their individual learning styles and their particular cultural background.

What also effects the process of gaining English proficiency is what I discussed earlier, namely teacher effectiveness and student motivation, and also the "background factors" identified by Krashen (1998). Often, students cannot, or do not want to learn, because of overwhelming environmental issues. A California study of Spanish-speaking students points out that while only 4 percent of dropouts was due to poor academic achievement, 38 percent of students who did not complete high school, did so for economic reasons such as the desire to work, financial difficulties, and home responsibilities (Rumberger, 1983).

Ultimately, the high school-age immigrant has to decide whether the education he or she receives is a vehicle to entry to mainstream America or an obstacle that stands in the way of economic survival. It is my observation that the young person who opts out of school does so, not necessarily because of difficulty in acquiring a new language, but more because he or she has never really had a personally fulfilling experience of, or appreciation for, academic literacy.

Coelho (1994) explains that the teenage newcomers who have been to school in their own countries, whose education has been uninterrupted, and have

experienced at least average success, are the students most likely to "make a smooth transition to school in the new country" (p.306). These are the youthful immigrants who are successful learning English. They are literate in their own languages.

On the other hand, not all immigrants share that stable, nurturing background. Coelho (1994) points out that some (and again, this is the group that I have encountered, and that has motivated me to write this thesis), because of experiences punctuated by war and civil turmoil, have had an educational experience that has limited the development of their learning to read and write in their own language, and to gain supportive notions about school, books, and study. These are the low-literate newcomers who are not comfortable in an academic setting. They are not at ease with reading. They do not trust what Hamayan (1994) refers to as the "functionality of writing" (p. 283). They do not see reading and writing as a means of practical communication. They are the dropouts for whom school is more of a problem than a solution.

What has occurred to me in the course of teaching and researching, and what cannot be ignored in the quest for the best way to aid in the acquisition of the second language, is the distinction that must be made between literacy and language. Using the terminology of the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB) (1996), literacy can be defined as the "ability to use text to communicate ideas in writing, understand written information, and make interpretations based upon it." According to the CCLB, "literacy is a set of skills that one carries across languages" but is nevertheless, "independent and distinct" (p.1) from language itself.

The main point I am making is that newcomers who become dropouts, or do not gain an adequate level of academic English proficiency, are in the situation they are in, not because of a language problem, per se, but rather because they have a limited "understanding of the general structural and functional characteristics of language" (TESOL, 1997, p. 8). In other words, they are lacking in some degree of overall general literacy.

When it comes to second language learning, whether the newcomer has had a solid educational background or has experienced tremendous turmoil in regards to schooling, what is important to understand and accept is that there is extensive research with ESL learners that documents the correlation between levels of native language literacy and the acquisition and development of English literacy (Lucas & Katz, 1994).

At this point, it may seem that I am about to become part of the same contentious arguments I have pointed out are so fruitless, which is whether the best way to teach newcomers literacy skills is to immerse them completely in English or through their native language. Actually, what I hope to do is avoid the political posturing and to consider only the educational issues. What I have found are sound principles and practices that if applied on the basis of students' needs, and with students willing to accept the risk of seeing themselves as learners, will lead to a breaking down of the communication barriers that stand in the way of English proficiency and entry into mainstream American life.

I think the key to embracing the "radical middle" and avoiding the extremes is to acknowledge a concept I introduced earlier, a basic principle of bilingual education, which is that "literacy transfers across languages". Stephen Krashen

(1996), "one of the most influential writers in second language acquisition theory" (Freeman & Freeman, 1994b, p. 567), explains that: "If a child knows how to read in one language, that child knows how to read, and that general ability will facilitate learning to read in another language" (Krashen, 1996, p. 24).

Krashen does not stand alone on this position. The International Reading Association (IRA) (IRA,1998) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (NCTE, 1997) also affirm that literacy can, and does, transfer across languages. The IRA and the NCTE, as well as the NRC (August & Hakuta, 1997) (the same panel of researchers that has grown wary of the "either-or" bilingual debate), have all taken a position, not only acknowledging the important role of native language proficiency in acquiring English, but also in suggesting that native language needs to be maintained and promoted, as part of the education of all bilingual students. Based on both my experience and researched verifiable facts, I think the uncompromising truth of the matter is that second language learning and English language reading and writing proficiency will not occur, whatever teaching methodology is used, unless there is high regard for the role of the first language.

In light of their position that the ability to communicate and to read and write effectively is necessary for the economic success of anyone living in the United States, the IRA (1999) in their 1998 delegate assembly, concluded that literacy instruction in the L2 rather than the L1, carries a high risk of reading problems and literacy attainment. As a result, they urged the use of native language whenever possible.

In their 1997 annual business meeting, the NCTE went beyond simply encouraging respect for the first language. The Council resolved to oppose any

legislation that would limit a student's ability to maintain their first language while acquiring literacy in English (NCTE, 1997). The NCTE (1997) explained their position thus:

> Current research confirms the fact that English language learners acquire English more easily if they are literate in their native language. Validating and supporting their native language and culture empowers students, resulting in academic and social benefits. Proficiency in more than one language is a decided intellectual and emotional advantage. Exclusion of students' language, culture, and experience from the classroom places students at a disadvantage in classroom interaction and can hinder their successful acquisition of English (p.1).

The authors of the 1997 NRC report have a view similar to that of the IRA and the NCTE. They believe that "students with a strong background in their home language are likely to develop higher levels of proficiency in English than those who do not have such a primary language advantage" (Gandara, 1997, Sec. III-B).

Cultural Factors

The authors of the IRA position and the NCTE resolution, as well as those of the NRC report, touch on an issue that is really at the center of bilingual education, and that is the link between culture and language. Actually, in so much of the material I have looked at, there is hardly a bilingual researcher that does not recognize the profound effect cultural background has on newcomers' adjustment to their new world, in general, and to their experiences in academics, in particular.

The Council on Anthropology and Education stated in a resolution that "culture is intimately related to language and the development of basic communication, computations, and social skills" (Ovando & Collier, 1985, p.149). Schools often try to promote cultural understanding by having cultural heritage

programs that include dance, food, holidays, and history. These happenings are fine, but they are superficial responses to issues that require deeper responses. Culture is more than that. It is more, as expressed by Brazilian educator, Paulo Friere, "how people labor, create, and make choices" (Spener, 1992, p.1). It is about outlooks and insights, about values and beliefs.

Language is at the heart of culture. There are no social communities without language. Without language, there is no basis for organized social behavior (Comrie, Mathews, & Polinsky, 1996). From the point of view of this paper, what makes understanding the relationship between culture and language so vital is that since the native language is part of culture, to deny access to that language or to ignore it, is to negate the value of a person's whole prior learning experience.

From my personal point of view, from my experience, it is language that carries the culture. I was raised in a bilingual environment. While I was born in the United States, my parents were born in northern Iraq. Growing up, the language of my household was an Aramaic-derived tongue known as Chaldean. In this milieu, I received not only access to a second language but to a special way of living and a unique point of view that my non-Chaldean acquaintances did not. While my cultural background has not necessarily made my life better than anyone else's, it certainly has made it richer than it would have been otherwise. TESOL (1997), the international organization for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, supports the idea that when people "learn their first language, they learn the cultural values, norms, and beliefs that are characteristic of their culture" (p.7). The point here is that without the acquired use of my parent's home language, I would have been deprived of the features and benefits of my inherited culture.

Key Principles of Second Language Acquisition

In the educational realm, the school community, and especially the classroom teacher, has a key role in validating newcomers' home experiences. In Empowering Minority Students, Cummins (1989) describes educational approaches as being either empowering or disabling, and as being either additive or subtractive of culture and language. He argues that if immigrants are expected to somehow learn English by simply being exposed to it, they would be doomed to failure. If the role of the school is to replace or subtract a student's home language and culture so English can be superimposed, then those being schooled will be disempowered. On the other hand, if hopeful new immigrants are allowed, encouraged, and assisted in using their first language while learning English, they will be empowered.

Throughout this paper, I have asserted that the L1 is essential for the development of the L2. I have seen in my own classroom the ease with which students strong in their own language take on and overcome their lack of exposure to and use of English. Conversely, I also know the heartache of the low-literate who are frustrated in this process. I have noted many in the educational research community who are sensitive to this issue. McKeon (1994), for example, writes that the relationship of language, culture, and schooling is especially critical, in how recent immigrants view school and school achievement, and in the process of acquiring a language.

In light of my experience and that of the experts, it is clear, but perhaps not totally settled, that home culture and language is where to start in the education of bilingual students. What I feel needs to be definitively established is that the process of language learning and literacy transfer is not some mystical and magical

happening. What is necessary is a sensible rationale to explain why the use of first language is central to second language acquisition. I have found that in the writing of psycholinguist Frank Smith (1995), who provides a grounded logical explanation in his very thoughtful compendium of essays, Between Hope and Havoc.

In the human experience, the key to understanding language acquisition is that language, whether it is the one we are born into or one in which we are forced into, is according to Smith (1995), "the core of our identity" (p. 19). Language, while it is certainly helpful in processing much needed information, is much more than that. In one essay, Smith (1995) explains that language is the defining characteristic of human beings. More than aiding us to communicate the facts of our lives, it is the means of creating and telling stories, which is the primary way in which we understand the world and how we inform ourselves and others of our place and experiences in it. (I will have more to say about *story*, towards the conclusion of my thesis.)

As children, we talk like the people we identify with. We join the "spoken language club" (Smith,1988). In the ideal world, if our education is completed and not disrupted, we join the academic literacy club, the premise being that we identify with the members of the educational community. Again, in the ideal world, learning a second language is an opportunity to experience new worlds. Venturing beyond the confines of our own world, a second language expands the intellect enabling us to break free of a single narrow view. Unfortunately, the reality is that many non-English speaking people are limited in their command of the L1 and faced with a limited sense of identity in the native and non-native culture. This is the problem and challenge facing bilingual education today. Since the basis of second language

learning is first language competence and a strong sense of identity, without first language competency, there can be no conceptual basis upon which a second language can be established. If the learner's sense of identity is diminished, then there is a limited structure to which a second language can be attached (Smith, 1995). Thus, the need for the use of the L1 in bilingual education. What needs to be asked is not whether or not the native language should be used in instruction to limited English speakers, but rather to acknowledge that native language is part of a newcomer's overall prior knowledge, and then ask how to best reach that student, building on their already existing literacy, whether it is high or low, and then trying to extend and broaden it further.

At this point, I believe I have established the general principles involved in second language acquisition. A question that now remains is how to apply them. For a bilingual program to be deemed successful, it must have three components: knowledge, language, and literacy (Krashen, 1996). For the needs of the limited in English proficiency (LEP) students to be met, a program must "teach the content of the school curriculum" as well as "the language of the school and the society" (Wong-Filmore & Valadez, 1986, p. 648). To the degree that LEP students can or cannot read and write in their native language, it must also encourage literacy development in the first language (Krashen, 1996).

For the already literate, the quest for knowledge simply continues. With study and practice, the English language grows. Practice is also the key to literacy. Smith (1975) asserts that "reading can be learned only through reading" (p.186). Krashen says that "we learn to read the same way we acquire language: by understanding messages" (Krashen & Biber, 1988, p. 22). In a supportive

environment where both the L1 is appreciated and the L2 is modeled, learners become more comfortable with, and begin making sense out of those messages, that are at first strange and foreign, but then become clear and comprehensible.

The path to English proficiency for the low-literate learner is really not so different than that of the higher literate person. An effective bilingual program reaches all students regardless of their literacy level, because subject matter is supplied in, or at least supplemented by, the students' primary language. This native language support can be provided by teachers or tutors. Instruction can be given in a classroom situation or in a one-on-one tutorial session. What varies is the degree of first language support. While students' education needs may vary greatly, the principle in reaching them is the same: "It is much easier to learn to read in a language one already understands, and once literacy is developed, it transfers rapidly to the second language" (Krashen, 1998, p. 27).

Age and Second Language Acquisition

What question needs to be asked now is how to develop literacy. However, there is an issue that should be discussed first, and that is whether the age of a non-English speaking newcomer is a factor in the outcome of approaches used in the ESL classroom. While my purpose in writing this paper is to reach the high school age immigrant who can be anywhere from age 13 to 19, often the sources I have referred to, discuss learners who range from pre-schoolers to middle-aged adults. Many educators make age distinctions using the terms: child, adolescent, or adult. Some simply describe learners as younger or older. The fact is, the issue is not settled and debate is occurring about whether there is a more efficacious approach based on age (Imel, 1995). In general, there is agreement that older students

should be held to higher expectations (TESOL, 1997) because they can "set their own goals and organize their own learning around their present life needs" (Imel, 1995, p.1), but this should not necessitate drastic differences in teaching. What *is* necessary, according to Garrison (1994), is good instruction that is using methods that are responsive in nature and ultimately meeting students' needs.

Language and Meaning

"Most students can be taught anything as long as it relevant to their world" (Tileston, 1998, p.2). While "relevancy" might be an overworked word in today's English vocabulary, the reality is that if a person cannot relate to a message, if there is no perceived sense in it, then that message is nonsense, or what Smith (1975) identifies as "noise", that is, "a signal that conveys no information, that cannot be interpreted" (p.31). The task of any teacher is to help their students connect the academic world to their own personal world, that is, make it relevant. Faced with a barrage of text-bound messages, the school life of the low-literate. and often orally frustrated newcomer, often borders on confusion. While learning does not occur where there is confusion, and consequently hardly anything makes sense, a lack of literacy skills does not imply the inability to learn or to think. It does point to a lack of exposure to and experience with a print environment (Smith, 1988).

What the teacher of LEP students must realize is that people, whatever their native tongue or culture, "learn when they have opportunities and reason to use language personally, and from what is demonstrated to them or from what they see others doing" (Smith, 1988, p. 55). An excellent example of someone who knew this was the resilient and tireless teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan. She expressed a

similar view when she reflected on her experience, starting in 1887, of working with Helen Keller. She said: "Language grows out of life, out of its needs and experiences. Languages and knowledge are indissoluably connected; they are interdependent. Good work in language presupposes and depends on a real knowledge of things" (Keller, 1954, p. 317). More than a hundred years after Miss Sullivan gave, in 1894, a written account of the methods she used to help her student out of her dark silence, her words continue, in 1999, to shed light on the process of gaining literacy and have a practical application in today's ESL classroom. This is her message:

> I never taught language for the purpose of teaching it; but invariably used language as a medium for the communication of thought; thus the learning of language was coincident with the acquisition of knowledge. In order to use language intelligently, one must have something to talk about, and having something to talk about is the result of having had experiences; no amount of language training will enable our children to use language with ease and fluency unless they have something clearly in their minds which they wish to communicate, or unless we succeed in awakening in them a desire to know what is in the minds of others (Keller, 1954, p. 317).

Clearly, the newcomers crossing over the borders into the United States, have something to say. No matter how limited their native language or English proficiency, they are rich in experiences. Perhaps they cannot *write* about them initially, but they have the capacity and need to *talk* about them. They can do that in their native language, and then eventually in English.

Oral language, I have established, provides a basis for reading. It is a starting point, "not a condition of deficit – to be defined simply as the lack of literacy" (Egan, 1991, p. 180). Quite to the contrary, there are many newcomers from non-mainstream backgrounds whose "oral language behaviors utilize the same kind of strategies or ways of thinking about or responding to text that schools expect and

value when learners work with written language" (Hudelson, 1994, pp. 139-40). Students from low-literate backgrounds can tell highly engaging stories, and they can do so using strategies that include "sequencing, explaining, evaluating, elaborating, clarifying" (Hudelson, 1994, p. 140).

Instructional Strategies

What I have found is that there is no one way or a best way to teach all low-literate LEP newcomers. Arriving at the "best practices" is the result of personalized interactions that over time reveals individual needs. That being said, it has become clear to me that there are instructional strategies that can be effective at any time and with any receptive and capable student.

Bilingual education abounds with many success stories. With all the variables that can be entered into the educational equation, and despite all of the imperfections in educational institutions, those involved have two choices. They can dwell on the negative or they can focus on the positive. It seems to me that success in anything worthwhile is a long-term process in which participants acknowledge and learn from mistakes made, and then move on. Along the way, they gain confidence and a clearer vision that leads to many lasting accomplishments.

What follows are some general suggestions and specific practices, based on sound principles, that if applied purposively and consistently, can help all bilingual newcomers, but in particular, low-literate language minority high school age students, to achieve basic literacy skills along with academic reading and writing competencies in the English language. The members of this group will eventually find their place in mainstream American society, and hopefully participate in the process of arriving at consensus.

An essential instructional strategy is to create an environment where the struggling immigrant sees school as a safe place – a haven where print can provide comfort and relief from conflict. So much of the research before me supports the prime significance of encouraging and inviting surroundings that can transform a classroom into a clubhouse. Krashen (1998) points out that just as the lack of books in a low socioeconomic household can be a predictor of dropping out of school, a high print environment is an excellent predictor of literacy development. Hudelson (1994) suggests that proper surroundings can "demonstrate the multiple functions of written language" (p. 141).

A print-rich environment would include charts connected to content area study, such as maps related to a social studies unit or the parts of speech for language arts. It would also have informational signs from school, like event schedules and daily procedures (Hudelson, 1994). Just as important would be student-generated materials which could include art projects, personal photos, or newspaper clippings that represent a statement of student ownership (Schifini, 1996).

While the posting of personal writings on bulletin boards has always been part of the lower grades culture, Schifini (1996) says that older students also need to see their work displayed. I feel that seeing one's own name and that of one's peers, conveys to the low-literate learner a message that the achievement of literacy is a realistic possibility, and that schooling can lie *within* the realm of satisfying experiences, and not *without*.

A second important instructional strategy is that activities must be "tied to the lives of the learners and reflect their experiences" (Wrigley, 1993, p.1). Hamayan

(1994) stresses that activities designed to develop the LEP student's academic literacy must be based on the "construction of meaning" (p. 293). In other words, they must be relevant.

Language production in the L2 is the result of the need to express experiences made clear in the thought processes that begin in the L1. At first, the thoughts are made known in a process that starts orally, but leads to the ultimate school goal of expressing them in reading and writing. The transition "can be accomplished by doing extensive pre-reading activities that prepare students for specific reading passages or specific writing tasks" (Hamayan, 1994, p. 293).

One meaning-based pre-reading exercise that makes so much sense to me, is what is commonly referred to as the language experience approach, or simply, LEA. It is not a limited, one-time, teacher-dominated lesson, but more of an all-encompassing, student-oriented perspective on learning.

There are many descriptions of LEA, probably as many as there are books on reading and writing. One used by Colvin (1997) can serve as a starting point for the discussion. For her, LEA is "a recounting in the student's own words of a personal experience" (p. 102). This experience is dictated by the student to an able scribe. Whomever the authors are, they all hold a common premise that whomever the students are, they all bring a language to school. And the students all have experiences that can be expressed via that language. Starting orally, what become written texts, do so, first with the assistance of the staff or a proficient peer, and then eventually, directly by the learner. Whether starting in the native language or not, the process leads to the use of English.

What makes LEA effective is that the outcome of the process is language owned by the newcomer. The first words that are learned are those of the students themselves. These words, because they are the students', become something "useful, personal, and exciting" (Kennedy & Roeder, 1975, p. 4). As a starting point, they open the door to the idea, especially for the low-literate person, that there is meaning and practicality in reading and writing.

In terms of second language acquisition, LEA is "one of the most effective methods of teaching reading to bilingual speakers because it elicits language from a student" (Lapp & Flood, 1983, p. 442). It is a strategy that "allows students and teachers to place the primary emphasis on communication and self-expression" (Kennedy & Roeder, 1975, p. 4).

The language experience approach focuses on the content of speech. It creates the framework, to find and use the words that hold the meanings, that human beings need to communicate the circumstances of the experiences of their lives, and the depth of feelings and emotions, as well as the ideas, generated by those experiences. While content is important, there is another aspect of speech that needs to be considered, and that is form.

Words provide meaning, but that meaning is conveyed by what I made reference to in the introduction of this paper, and that is the "symbols and sounds that are arranged in our speaking and writing" (Kessler & McDonald, 1988). Written language relies on the use of the alphabet; oral language builds on sound. What all beginning language learners lack, whether it is their first or second tongue, is "an understanding that speech is composed of a series of individual sounds", or what is referred to as "phonemic awareness" (Yopp, 1992, p. 696). In terms of LEP

students and their quest towards reading proficiency and making sense of alphabetic script, this is highly significant, because a learner's "level of phonemic awareness is widely held to be the strongest single determinant of the success that he or she will experience in learning to read – or conversely, the likelihood that he or she will fail" (Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, & Beeler, 1998, p. 20).

By introducing this discussion of phonemic awareness, I am acknowledging the role of phonics in the teaching of reading. As an issue, phonics cannot be ignored, but it needs to be viewed in the same spirit as that called for by Dr. Pearson (Birdyshaw & Potter, 1997) in his quote about embracing a "reasoned stance" and becoming part of the "radical middle". Monica Jones (1996), a researcher, specifically, of phonics in ESL literacy instruction, expresses this assessment:

> Phonics and spelling should not be considered as ends in themselves, but neither can the acquisition of underlying principles be taken for granted and/or ignored. Anyone with limited literacy must attain a mechanical command of English in order to cope receptively and productively with written language (p. 13).

I believe this statement of Jones, who is a strong proponent of the direct teaching of phonics, complements the position of the International Reading Association (1998). The IRA holds that phonics instruction is an important part of beginning reading, especially in the primary grades, but for it to be useful, must be imbedded in the context of a total reading/language arts program.

An issue that I find important in the context of my thesis, and that needs to be addressed in this discussion, is whether phonics is effective with the high school age newcomer. From my readings now and from my total graduate school studies, I see that the study of phonics is primarily a childhood activity. Graham and Walsh (1996) point out that because beginning older, low-literate ESL learners have a

limited vocabulary and limited control of grammar and pronunciation, but bring to the classroom survival skills that have allowed them to circumvent the use of reading and writing, they would not be motivated to respond to a purely phonics approach. Jones (1996) makes a similar admission when she says, "With children, an early phonics emphasis appears to have less influence on comprehension as the years pass, probably because of the increasing emphasis upon the importance of schematic knowledge of the topic, vocabulary, and reasoning ability" (p. 12).

In my classroom, as I have noticed my students stumble through reading passages, I see their great need for making letter and sound connection. I have come to see that LEA addresses that need. Using the students' own meaning-generated compositions, phonics is not neglected, but rather, integrated into a lesson. When using the language experience approach, "the first words a student tells are broken down and studied in terms of their phonetic parts" (Kennedy & Roeder, 1975, p. 5). Once "the word-meaning relationships have been mastered", according to Simich-Dudgeon (1989), "a phrase may be broken down into individual words, then into syllables, next into letters, then finally, appropriate sounds can be given to the component parts" (p. 5). What happens in the LEA classroom is the incorporation of content and form. Through meaning-based instruction, what is provided for the older, struggling ESL reader, is a practical and non-threatening way and an informal and relaxed atmosphere that serves as an invaluable tool in expanding and supporting literacy and language development (Schifini, 1996).

When I teach, I often remind my students to always see what I call the "big picture". A major goal of mine for them is that they can see themselves in a continuum of forward movement, from being limited to being *less* limited, from

gaining proficiency to gaining *more* proficiency. I tell them, and they begin to understand, that progress takes place "little-by-little". With each newly acquired word and each successfully expressed idea, newcomers gradually realize that being "new" is not a permanent state in their education, but rather, just a stage in their total academic development.

A third instructional strategy that can help LEP students achieve the "big picture" goals of knowledge, language, and literacy (identified by Krashen,1996) is the implementation of a content-centered approach to teaching. These three components of an effective bilingual program do not emerge, I believe, separately or independently of each other, but together and inter-dependently, at all times and at whatever the stage of a student's development.

Krashen (1982) suggests that second language acquisition occurs in an environment where language and content instruction are integrated. Freeman and Freeman (1998) insist that "because people learn language as they use it, it is logical to have them learn English as they study meaningful content" (p.32). TESOL (1997) believes that content-based language teaching is extremely important for the LEP learner. It is so valued by the organization that its second goal of Standard 2 in its 1997 series of goals and standards for pre K-12 students is: "To use English to achieve academically in all content areas". This goal states that "Students will use English to obtain, process, construct, and provide subject matter information in spoken and written form" (p. 9).

For the newcomers with low literate abilities, it might seem an insurmountable task to gather information on new concepts in a language to which they are just being introduced (Hamayan, 1994). Be that as it may, if high school

age immigrants expect to fulfill the graduation requirements of the English-speaking institutions they are enrolled in, they have no choice but to follow the curriculum. Fortunately, they do not have to develop total literacy before they can learn content.

In my adult life, I have come to the realization, (and I always tell my students this,) that if we wait to be perfect to try something, we will never do anything. Information gathering does not have to wait for complete literacy achievement. Hamayan (1994) asserts that "literacy activities can be extended into academic content areas" (p. 297). The point I am making is that the proper instructional literacy activities give the newcomers language they can use for content area learning. In the broader realm, as literacy transfers and develops, both conversational and academic language grows, leading to higher and increasing levels of knowledge.

What is necessary, on a very real and practical level, are well planned and orchestrated activities that make instruction comprehensible. Freeman and Freeman (1998) offer these suggestions, specifically for the secondary English language learner teachers, to assure the possibility of a successful content-centered approach:

1. Use visuals and realia. Always try to move from the concrete to theabstract.
2. Use gestures and body language.
3. Speak clearly and pause often, but don't slow speech down unnaturally.
4. Say the same thing in different ways (paraphrase).
5. Write key words and ideas down. (This slows down the language.)
6. Use overheads and charts whenever appropriate.
7. Make frequent comprehension checks.
8. Have students explain main concepts to one another, working in small groups. They can do this in their first languages.
9. Above all, keep oral presentations or reading assignments short. Collaborative activities are more effective than lectures or assigned readings (p. 37).

A final instructional strategy I will put forth that can aid in second language acquisition is to develop a classroom that encourages the ESL student "to learn with and from each other as well as the teacher" (Hudelson, 1994, p. 141). Along with being a place where approaches to education are content-centered and meaning-based, the print-rich language nurturing classroom creates an atmosphere that encourages and provides learning through student cooperation and collaboration.

Just as we learn to read by reading, we learn to speak by speaking. In a cooperative learning classroom, students are in a position where they have more opportunity to speak as opposed to a more traditional teaching pattern where they are being only spoken to. According to Spencer Kagan (1993), a proponent and developer of cooperative learning structures, "We discard sequential structures for simultaneous structures. Rather than calling on the students to participate one-at-a-time, we direct them to talk to each other in pairs, all students at once. The interaction is simultaneous, occurring all over the room" (p. vii).

Before I had an opportunity to study and experience cooperative learning strategies personally, and before I actually employed them in my teaching, I thought of group work with ESL students as a situation of "the blind leading the blind". But that is not the case. Researchers have found that in classes where teachers used collaborative work, high schoolers had more chances to try out the L2. Not only did the quantity of their talk increase, but so did the quality. One might think there would be more mistakes without the teacher to make corrections, but on the contrary, the novice language learner took more risks and tried out more advanced structures and vocabulary in a small group than in front of the whole class (Freeman & Freeman, 1998).

Citing at least ten different references, Simich-Dudgeon (1998) says that in the last twenty-five years or so, "research has proved that collaborative academic talk is at the heart of the learning experience" (p.1). In terms of the low-literate and struggling immigrant, other studies comparing high-, medium-, and low-achieving students show that the high achievers fare as well in cooperative classes as in traditional ones, but the medium and low achievers make dramatic gains" (Freeman & Freeman, 1998, p. 167). What verbal interactions with peers does is to support literacy by helping the learner to "clarify their thinking and introduces them to new perspectives that facilitate reflection and innovative thinking" (Simich-Dudgeon, 1998, p.1).

My assessment is that the collaborative process places LEP students in Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development". It pushes them to a point of need where they seek out a word or expression, not to fulfill an assignment necessarily, but to make themselves understood. Kagan (1993) would say that they are engaging in "communicative behavior, during which words are produced not as an end in themselves, but as a means toward accomplishing a goal, communicating meaning" (p. vii).

While the concrete and immediate goal of cooperative learning in ESL is the development of the English language and literacy, the outcome of using this instructional strategy is much more expansive. An important effect is that it creates a positive and anxiety-free atmosphere. A significant obstacle to second language acquisition are emotional factors referred to by Krashen and Terrell (1995) as "affective filters" (p. 38). People in general, and young struggling immigrants in particular, are not especially fond of public speaking. Kagan (1993) has observed

that by forming "supportive cooperation learning groups" for LEP students, a fear factor is reduced "often enough to make speaking more comfortable and more likely" (p. ix).

Reflections

In choosing the four instructional strategies I decided to develop and discuss, it is certainly clear to me that I have not exhausted, by any means, all the current quality ideas and practices observable in bilingual education today. When I started this thesis, my hope was to tie together what I had experienced as a teacher with what I was learning as a student. I wanted what I was doing in graduate school to be a catapult for me to be a more directed and more effective educator. I wanted the initials *M.A.* after my name to mean more than that I completed an institution's course requirements for a degree. What I want is that is it means that I am, and will always be, on a personal and professional journey to being a better and more accomplished leader of students. Following the advice of G. K. Chesterton, I want to be busy being born again and again, and not busy dying.

My goal since I started my researching and writing has been to look for and find some workable ideas I could use in my classroom. I have wanted some practical strategies I could use with all of my students, particularly those who are struggling with literacy. I believe that the four I have submitted, accomplish my goal. But more than that, my grander objective has been to understand the historical and philosophical base and rationale for the validity of these practices. I believe that I have done that also.

In the lengthy but captivating process of researching, I have become aware that there are literally thousands upon thousands of volumes of books, articles, and

manuscripts, based on a multitude of research projects and current practices, written and developed by so many dedicated and superlative researchers and teachers throughout the world, who are involved in the questions and issues relating to bilingual education. Knowing that there are so many involved in looking for the answers, I would hope that the expression of my point of view might be a contribution in the effort that compels all those involved in trying to breach the barriers to human communication, and those trying to help those stranded on the islands of isolation caused by language differences.

Importance of Story

Before I bring this work to a close, I have a few more comments to make about helping students to read. In thinking about how people communicate and what might be useful in helping them to read, it has occurred to me that what everyone has in common, and yet what makes us all different, is that we all have our own unique *story*. Considering the introductory quotes of Donne and Dewey, I would say that what can cause walls to crumble and communities to grow is the communication of these stories.

During a workshop in the course of my graduate studies, I had an opportunity to meet, listen to, and learn from storyteller, author, and poet Joseph Bruchac. In the time that he was with the class, he used stories to teach, lecture, and entertain us. In the opening sentence to his readers in a book on storytelling, he writes, "Few things have helped me understand the world better than a good story" (Bruchac, 1997, p. xi). I could not agree more.

The fact is, stories surround us and abound in so many forms. In history classes, my students hear stories as an organized account of events and

circumstances involving peoples and nations. In English classes, they understand stories as a configuration of plot, characters, setting, and purpose. In everyday life, stories become the told remembrances of happenings that capture and stir our emotions, and stay with us for an entire lifetime.

If, as I stated in my introduction, communication is "the stuff of human life", then it is our stories that are mostly what is being communicated. In the study of biology, human beings are seen as the most advanced type of animal on earth.

> What makes us different from other creatures is not our opposable thumbs, not our ability to perambulate on only two legs, not our lack of feathers, but penchant for creating and using narratives for just about every purpose. (Kinghorn & Pelton, 1991, p. xi).

Kinghorn and Pelton (1991) write that human beings are storytelling animals, and that every human culture on earth has its own fund of stories, and regardless of the sources, they all have their roots in the texture of human experience. So, regardless of a person's language or their level of reading and literacy, everyone has an interest in *story*, both as teller and listener.

The power of a story, I believe, is that while it has its start in orality, it leads to reading. Jim Trelease (1991) says that the act of reading a story out loud to a person "has been shown to be the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading" (p. 200). Why? According to Frank Smith (1985), listeners, knowing that a source of what is being heard is a book, (1) receive insights that printed marks in a text are a valuable source of interesting stories, and (2) acquaints them with the peculiarities and conventions of written language. Meaning and form, content and print, reader and text – they all come together in a story. Stories are comprehensible word pictures, that "little-by-little", can move the willing and able from orality to literacy. Within the educational

process, what actually happens depends on the choices made and the actions taken.

Conclusion

As a teacher, in my classroom, I am often taken aback by the thought of all the circumstances that have brought me here and led me to this place. While I acknowledge that I teach because of steps I have taken, I am also keenly aware that I have arrived here because of the efforts and achievements of so many others. So too the process of writing this thesis. While the effort is mine, my accomplishment is due greatly to people who have researched and authored the sources I have used.

In looking for a solution in how to reach and teach the low literate learner, it has become obvious to me that there are no quick-fix approaches to long-term challenges. Language, knowledge, and literacy can only be achieved and grow in an environment where an educational institution is committed to excellence, whatever the time frame.

Progress in bilingual education, and really, in all education, can occur only in an atmosphere where professional cooperation, communication, and creativity are practiced and encouraged. In a place where all students can succeed, classroom and administrative offices are not "islands unto themselves", but rather models of collegiality where answers are arrived at as a result of addressing needs, and not because of someone issuing an edict. The non-English speaking newcomers and their families are not considered as problems, but rather as future American citizens who will be a source of pride for the institutions that have had an opportunity to serve them.

Teaching is an exciting profession. It is an opportunity to effect positive change in people's lives. For me, that is my goal, and that is the possibility. In life, there are no guarantees, but there are choices. It is my hope that the efforts I make with my students, leads them to make decisions that will bring satisfaction and excellence to their lives.

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